

Charlotte Sounds

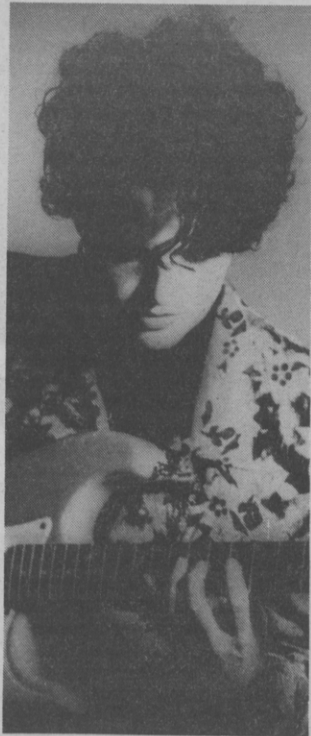
Charlotte Yates is a Wellington based singer, songwriter, performer who has just released a solo album called *Queen Charlotte Sounds*. On (and for) the record, she calls herself Charlotte Sometimes, which alludes to the fact that at any one time she has a number of musical irons in the fire.

For example, she's about to go on tour with a revue called *Babes In The Mood* — "a high speed trip through musicals, comedy, dance and split personalities encompassing everything from Russian chants and pumping dance floor hits to Rodgers and Hammerstein." The other four "babes" are Jackie Clarke, Robin Nathan, Janet "Six Volts" Roddick and actress and writer (author of *Marching Girls*) Fiona Samuel. On the press kit the girls have very wittily superimposed their heads on repeated images of that crotch grabbing shot of Madonna from the cover of *Interview* magazine.

Afficionados of the zanier side of the Wellington music scene will note that both Charlotte and Jackie are also members of *When The Cat's Been Spayed*. These are the sort of multi-talented women Charlotte likes to "hoon around with" when she's not writing songs for herself, or other people.

"As a writer it's bloody interesting to try to write technically for somebody, to write less introspective things, because it has to be relevant for the singer." Thus she's written for Jackie Clarke in *Putty*, and recently a song for the *Holidaymakers*' singer.

Ms. Sometimes was in fact a vet by profession before she gave up financial security for the life of a musician. During her years on the rural beat she gained insights into how the less well-equipped live, hence the political consciousness evident in some of the songs on *Queen Charlotte Sounds*, for example, 'Better Than Any'. However, she does bristle at the



instant categorisation of being labelled a "feminist singer songwriter" ("That's about the most boring way you could describe me").

"I'm really struck by people that are caught by situations of economic deprivation, but I'm not a missionary. I worked as a vet in an area where unemployment was from 10 to 20 per cent, which had a major impact on the women. When you're talking about a female singer/songwriter, I've got an angle on things, I have a range of musical/cultural beliefs which are reflected in my lyrics. The idea of women being trapped by economic circumstances freaks me out, you have to rationalise it."

Charlotte describes her current high musical profile as a "big fat surprise". She says she learnt piano and clarinet at school but was more exposed to Anglican church singing and jazz than pop music. Somewhere along the line she learnt how to play guitar and

keyboards as well (as can be heard on *Queen Charlotte Sounds* but the academically gifted girl was set on being a vet. Songwriting was just a hobby, until one day something clicked, now she's one of those people who can actually write proper songs. Martin Phillips, Dianne Swann and Dave Dobbyn are peers she admires; Van Morrison, Paul Kelly and REM are among the artists she listens to, and she also enjoys rap and dance music.

There's no doubt, she's a singularly talented and highly intelligent individual, so much so one wishes she'd put some of her thoughts to paper as well as song... Charlotte Yates has a lot to say. **DONNA YUZWALK**

Labi Siffre

Labi Siffre is far from a household name around these parts, although he's been in this business around twenty years. He's evolved from the serious young ballad singer of the seventies into a fully fledged R'n'B man on his most recent album, *Man Of Reason*. Here he mixes his incredibly strong lyrics with a soulful radio-friendly sound, a true 'iron fist in a velvet glove' deal.

Normally chatting with stars in the plush surroundings of a record company suite is something I loathe, but from the first question on in, it was obvious that Mr Siffre is no simple muso on a promo junket, but that rarity, a thinking man. A simple inquiry into his sixties London roots brought forth an impassioned flow of influences.

"God it was incredible! I was very young and more there as an observer, but I saw the likes of Zoot Money and Georgie Fame and Mose Allison and Screamin' Jay Hawkins and Jimmy Reed, and at the same time hearing records by



people like Monk, Mingus, Coltrane, Ayler and Archie Shepp. It all seemed so powerful and passionate."

After that I trusted the man wholeheartedly, and our conversation stretched from the allotted 20 minutes as Siffre explained his lyrical stance, his career sideline as a poet and numerous other things of import until after an hour and quarter an angry promotions person banned me from the building. So here are the edited highlights of an intriguing conversation with a fine musician and writer, definitely not an

everyday experience.

ON RACE PORTRAYAL:

"My song 'School Days' is about positive images, all the images of non-white people we were given were bad ones, the lazy wide-eyed shuffling nigger, they love to sing and dance but have no intelligence, or never give the Indians whiskey, you'll never civilise them. I was never told about genocide or how a lot of the major institutions of the West are built on the blood, sweat and bodies of non-whites, or the broken treaties, we were just told how we had no culture or usefulness, and I believe this needs to be redressed."

ON SONGWRITING:

"Writing songs that have intelligent lyrics is almost frowned upon, if you write something that has a nice tune and something to say with its lyrics, the attitude is 'Well let's not mix politics and entertainment', or 'This social conscience seems like a good business move'."

"Information is power, and if you can persuade the mass to pay attention to trivia you can continue with the system as it is. Basically society moves at the pace of the slowest, and the slowest are those with the most to lose."

ON POETRY:

"I was incredibly influenced by people like Raymond Carver, and Hugh Selby Jr. He totally changed my approach to life and writing. I've kept the poetry and music two separate things though, I don't want people to say 'Oh yes, it's just the songs without music.' Although the poetry evolved out of songs I couldn't use as songs, the two things are very different: songs are quite restrictive in that there is a classic structure to follow, and with poetry I found this new freedom, a new way to communicate."

KIRK GEE

Noiseworks

Some of you will be too young to remember Jon Stevens first time round, way back in the seventies when he was having hits with 'Montego Bay' and 'Jezebel'. He was just 17 at the time. Now 12 years later he's a local lad made good as lead singer with Oz rockers Noiseworks. Gone are the tight white pants and shirts slashed to the waist — the Jon Stevens of today is surprisingly mellow and modest.

Having seen the video to Noiseworks' latest single 'Hot Chilli Woman' I was expecting a moronic macho rocker to match the song, but no, he's sweet and shy. He talks about the hardship of having such an early success, he was an innocent in



a shark infested industry. But these days, he's philosophical about what he does, having no burning ambition to make it big, just to keep making his living doing what he does best.

Noiseworks' latest album is called *Love Versus Money* which, Jon

explains, encapsulates the two sides of being a working musician.

"I think it's easy these days for bands to get caught up in their business responsibilities — how much money they need, how much they're earning, a band is basically a business — so if you want some creative freedom you have to really struggle for it. This record is all about our need to try new things, to explore."

Jon is back in his homeland to promote the album, but also to make a video for the next single, 'R.I.P. (Millie)', a tribute to his mother who died of cancer. Filming will take place in a marae near Wellington. One gets the impression that this material comes much closer to expressing the real Jon Stevens than the crass commerciality of the current single.

DONNA YUZWALK

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